

Latino students find encouragement through Puente Project

Like all of the students involved in the Puente Project at Lee College, future physicist Hugo Anguiano and budding engineer Verence Valencia received incredible support on their journey to an associate degree and beyond: help with academics, scholarship money, connections with professional mentors, exposure to new cultural experiences and a deeper understanding of their Latino heritage.

But it's the feeling of having a second family on campus — a Puente family bonded by the shared goal of completing their education and achieving their dreams — that has meant the most of all.

"I like to push myself; I like a little struggle," said Valencia, now a junior industrial engineering major at the University of Houston who continues to return to Lee College to work as a Puente tutor. "I knew I wanted to move up and advance, and the classes I took gave me more structure as a student and motivation to talk to my professors. But the family part of Puente really helped me out. I found study buddies and my parents got involved in my education. The friends I met in Puente are the ones I still talk to at UH. We all transferred together, and we still have access to Puente resources and guidance."

Lee College was the fourth community college district in Texas to host the Puente Project, which aims to increase the number of under-served students who transfer to four-year colleges and universities, earn college degrees and return to their communities as leaders and role models for new generations. Approximately 42 percent of students enrolled at Lee College are Hispanic/Latino, earning the college a federal designation as a Hispanic-Serving Institution.

Through Puente, Latino students are provided with academic support centered on integrated reading and writing, English and an introduction to Mexican-American Studies. They visit universities around the state, like the University of Texas and Sam Houston State University, and are invited to participate in academic conferences and unique social and cultural events, like the annual "Noche de Familia" and Dia de los Muertos celebrations. Puente students have also been involved in highlighting the contributions of the Latino community in Baytown, even painting a mural at Sterling Municipal Library that depicted the stories of those who made an impact on Latino and multicultural history in the region.

"The trips and events bring us even closer together because they show us a glimpse of the future and where we can all be if we work harder," said Anguiano, who has worked as a Puente tutor for 2 years while also pursuing associate degrees in physics and mathematics. "I came here at 9 from Mexico and still feel that I've learned a new perspective on what it means to be Chicano in America — the activists and artists, the struggles and meaningful places."

Puente students are also paired with community mentors who share their professional and academic experiences while motivating the students to reach their goals. All Puente mentors are professionals who have earned a college degree and committed to spending at least nine hours per semester interacting with their mentees. Those who

are interested in serving as mentors are invited to a training dinner set for 6-8 p.m., Wednesday, Oct. 5, in the Bayer Conference Center on campus.

"I gained a good role model and a friend," Valencia said, describing the ExxonMobil engineer who took her under her wing. "Getting a degree is one thing, but getting a job is another. She has spent time to show me what it is to be a professional engineer, helped me with essays and helped me with networking. I've learned so much from her educationally and personally."

And although Anguiano has benefited from his relationship with his mentor and the instructors and staff who keep Puente going, he has also learned how to be a better student and leader. When he earns his doctorate degree, begins conducting research in particle physics and quantum theory and starts finding answers to the age-old questions of the universe, he will remember how the Puente Project at Lee College made a difference.

"I would encourage students to put their energy and focus into Puente," Anguiano said. "In those classes, you're more likely to find out what you want to be and do. You don't have to worry too much about how to succeed in college; you're part of a family."